Stated Christian Conference

Asserted to be a

Christian Duty:

OR, A

Plea for Stated Conference.

Wherein the Nature and Foundation of *Christian Conference* is Considered; the Reasons for *Stated Conference* urged with several Cogent and Strenuous Arguments; the Objections against it are duly weigh'd, and Answered.

Then they, that feared the Lord spake often one to another, Mal. 3. 16.

Many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall be increased, Dan. 12. 4.

LONDON:

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Christian Duty:

A

HAving of late been Converſant with ſome Serious Chriſtians, in Chriſtian Conference, I have met with ſome ſevere Reflections on that account, not ouly from carnal People, but from Perſons profeſſing Godlineſs; who, tho they do not, nor indeed can, deny Holy Conference, to be a Duty, yet they ſeem to Countenance none but what is accidental: But, If we have ſtated Lectures, ſtated Prayers, ſtated Times of Receiving, and the like; Why not Stated Conference? Why muſt that Duty be laid aſide, until ſome happy Accident happen? And when it doth happen, we muſt be in a very good Frame too, or elſe the World ſhall be the Subject Matter of the Conference, and not the Things of God, as is too obvious among Profeſſors. So that if we muſt have no Stated Conferences about Heaven, and Heavenly Things, we are like to have none at all, ſo far as I can ſee.

I confeſs, I am not willing to Engage in any Duty, or eſpouſe any Cauſe, for which I cannot render a Reaſon; and therefore have thought fit, by the following Diſcourſe, to vindicate, not only my own, but the Practice of all ſuch as are engaged in the ſame Cauſe. I have endeavoured to avoid Prolixity, and to ſpeak multum in parvo, much in little, but if I have prov'd deficient, I hope thy Chriſtian Candour will put the beſt Conſtruction on my Intentions: But however the following Arguments prevail with me; If any be otherwiſe minded, I muſt crave their Pardon for ſeeing with my own Eyes.

Philalethes.

A Serious Recommendation of the following Diſcourſe to the Reader.

THough the very Title of this Diſcourſe, *Staied Conference Aſſerted*, praiſes it in the Gate; yet there is ſuch an Univerſal Inſenſibleneſs of the great Uſe and Excellency of this Duty, that it may be no Superfluous Addition to urge it again, and again, on the Hearts and Affections, as alſo on the Conſciences and Judgments of Chriſtians.

Leaving therefore the Argumentative Part to what is ſaid in the following Diſcourſe, I will, by way of *Preface*, entertain the *Reader* with the Practical; and lay down the Rules and Directions, that may be moſt Subſervient to the due, and moſt effectual Obſervation, Uſe, and Improvement of this Duty; and to which the Duty and Ordinance is again, and on the other ſide, moſt profitable and conducing. For all Spiritual Exerciſes are in a Circulation of Graces, requiring them for a right Performance of thoſe Duties, and returning Strength to, and Increaſe of them, from the waiting on God in them.

1. For the right Management of *Holy Conference*, Chriſtians ſhould labour to furniſh themſelves with all Spiritual Light, Knowledge, and Underſtanding; That in Malice, or any Evil Incli-

Inclination, *They may be Children*, Howbeit, *grown Men and of full Age in Understanding*; having *Senses exercised* to *discern*, or *distinguish*, between *Good* and *Evil*, both in Points of Judgement, and of Practice; that so they may be *Teachers* in *Holy Conference*; And so in what follows from thence, That they may abound, as in *Spiritual Sense* or *Judgment*, so in *Utterance*, an Ability from the Holy Spirit, to speak in their Measure and Station as the *Oracles of God*.

Object. And if it should be thought, This is an Encroachment on the Ministerial Office, or tending to thrust it out:

Answ. I am fully Perswaded, As nothing tends more to the Refining, quickning, stirring up Ministerial Graces, and Gifts, *viz.* than Ministers assisting, encouraging, and being present, as Opportunity allows, even to a *Proestotal*, or Presidential Eminency herein. So nothing will prevail more to give an Inward, Intelligent, Conscientious Estimation, and double Honour of them for their Works sake among all Christians.

2. To be *Full of Faith* in Jesus Christ, in which the Treasures of Experience and Acquaintance with all the Dealings of God, and Christ, and of his Spirit lye; Even in God's *Fulfilling the Good Pleasure of his Grace in his Servants; and the Work of Faith with Power, that the Name of the Lord Jesus may be Glorified in Us, and we in Him, according to the Grace of God, and of our Lord Jesus Christ; Having the Spirit of Faith, we know how to speak and to declare all God has done for*

our

our Souls, both in the ſhinings out of the *Light of his Countenance* and in the Times of Darkneſs, and with-drawing; in the comings of his Spirit upon us, to promote in Holineſs; and in the Weakneſs we find, when he with-draws from us.

3. That we may *Edyfie one another in Love*, flowing from the Love of God in Chriſt to us, and Re-aſcending in Love to Him, and ſo coming down on, and to all his Servants; The *coveting earneſtly the beſt Gifts* is very neceſſary for *Chriſtian Conference*, and *Communion*; Yet the Apoſtle ſhews the more Excellent, Tranſcending way of Love; and the great Excellency of it, is ſeen throughout the whole, 1 *Cor.* 13. which may be called the Directory for Chriſtian Communion, and Conference.

4. That all things be managed with *Decency*, and *Order*, which, however abuſed to Ceremonial Additions to other Duties by too many, is the Apoſtles ſpecial Direction for theſe Holy Conferences; That there be neither *Confuſion* within, nor Expoſal to Contempt without; That Chriſtians may have juſt Freedom of *Speaking*, *One by One*; and that if any eſpecial Manifeſtation of Truth be made to any one, in any Point, there may be care taken, that due place may be given, and Room made for it; and that Mutual, Humble, and Prudent Judgments may be made on things ſpoken; For in all theſe Caſes, the Spirits of Chriſtian Conferrers are *Subject*, both to themſelves within themſelves, and Mutually to the Spirits of one another.

5. The

5. The last Direction, that as the Discourse it self is, so that all these Conferential Exercises may be in an especial manner placed under Divine Blessing; and the presence of Christ with those, tho but *Two or Three gathered together*, earnestly sought by Prayer continually.

Now seeing the Artifice of Satan is to draw away the Duty it self, by acting *Ananias* upon a part of it; that is, its stated and prefixt Appointments; Knowing, that if that Guard, and Watch upon it be removed, The Duty will quickly be lost in very great measures of it; For as we say; That which is every Man's Business, is no ones; So that which is the Business of every Season, and of all alike, proves to be the Business of almost no Season at all; It hath none found for it; As therefore the Wisdom of the great Apostle, and Bishop of our Profession, hath taken care for setled *Watchmen*, and Elders in the Ministry of his Word, and a fixed Day, *the Lords Day*, for their Ministry, as in Season; and left it to them to Appoint other times as without Season; And as He having Commanded the Duty of mutual *Exhortation*, and *Provocation* to *Love*, and *Good Works*; So having Appointed a set, distinct Time, the *Sabbath Day*, as a Day not for our own words, Christian Conference comes in course; He hath left it also to the Fidelity, and Prudence of his Servants, to secure further the main Duty, by Appointing some certain Seasons at other times also, particular and certain Times for it; that there may be a Summons to it by such Appointments for

for it. Now this point is Discourſed in the following Tract with that Plainneſs, Familiarity, and Addreſs to every underſtanding, and yet with that Nervouſneſs, and Strength of Diſcourſe, and Seriouſneſs and Savour of Scripture; That it is not only a Perſuaſive to, but a Pattern for *Chriſtian Conference*, and ſo let Divine Bleſſing be upon it. *T. B.*

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Stayed

Stated Conference Aſſerted to be a Chriſtian Duty. Or, *A Plea for Stated Chriſtian Conference.*

WHereas Prefix'd; and Stated Conference is Practis'd in, and about *London*, and alſo in *New-England*, and elſewhere by ſome ſerious Chriſtians; A Queſtion may be Rais'd, whether it be a Duty, and a Part of Inſtituted Worſhip, or not? The Diſcuſſion and Reſolution of which may be of Univerſal profit, in all Religious Actions, and Particularly in this very Caſe, concerning Stated Conference; And that it is a Duty of very great Uſe, and Acceptance with God, I ſhall Labour to Evince in the following Treaty upon it.

Now ſeeing the Foundation of every Ordinance, or Act of Worſhip, in which we are to draw nigh to God, muſt be found in the Word of God; The preſent Diſcourſe will be moſt

Regularly, and Safely Grounded in a Consideration of the Nature of Religious Conference; And then of Stated, or Prefix'd Conference; And how far each is Authorized, and Encourag'd by the Word of God.

Now as to Religious Conference, or Conference in sacred matters out of, and according to the Scriptures; It is so out of all possibility of doubt; That Indeed, the neglect of it is the Great Sin, and Prophaness of the Age; It is the great use of our *Tongue*, which is therefore call'd, *Our Glory*; and the *wholesome Tongue is a Tree of Life, which Feeds many, and Ministers Grace to the Hearers*, *Eph.* 4. 29. Thus *David*, Psal. 119. 46. Declares; He will speak of the Divine *Testimonies before Kings, and will not be Ashamed*, Psal. 37. 30. He gives it as the Character of a Gracious Man; That *His Tongue Talketh of Judgment*: Seeing then Discoursing of Things pertaining to the Glory of God, and our Eternal Enjoyment of Him, is the Duty of every Christian; and his Priviledge, and Immunity also, It necessarily follows; That there must be mutual Freedom, and Liberty for Christians to speak one to another; For else the Exercise of one Christian in his Duty shall be an Embarrassent upon another Christian, in his Discharge of the same Duty: It is True: The Teaching, or Preaching, and Speaking by way of Office and Authority is a distinct Point, That this Discourse doth not now Intermeddle

termeddle with; The proper Scope, and Subject of which is the Improvement of the Tongue, and Speech, according to the Understanding, we have in Scripture, and the Sense we have of it upon our Hearts for the mutual Enlightning of one another, and the Inflaming our Hearts mutually in Things pertaining to the *Kingdom of God.* For this is the Great Advantage we have in All Things from this Conferential Faculty; That we can by it mutually Instruct, and Inform, as also Perswade, Affect, and work upon one another.

Accordingly we find in the Things, wherein we have to do with God frequent mentions in Scripture of this Conferential Ability Employed, and Improved; and either urged by vehement Excitations to it, or Recorded with Honour, and Commendation of those, who so waited upon God in it; As the Apostle, *Heb.* 3. 13. *Exhort one another Daily, least any be harden'd through the deceiptfullness of Sin; Exhort one another, and so much the more, as you see the Day Approaching; Consider one another, Provoke to Love, and Good Works,* Ch. 10. 25. And with Honour of them who did so it is said; *They that feared the Lord spake often, one to another; And a Book of Remembrance was Written before the Lord,* Malach. 3. 16.

There Remains then nothing in doubt, but that we have not either a plain, positive Institution of Set, prefixed Conferences; nor

the Pattern of it, but only of occaſional.

But in Anſwer to this; Beſides even what hath been already ſpoken, and ſhall be further Diſcourſed from Scripture; when we have clear Grounds in Scripture for the ſubſtantials of a Duty, or ordinance, It is moſt undeniable, the prudent, and Advantagious mannagement is under thoſe General Rules of Scripture, (not to bring in, as many have done new Ceremonies, and ſet *their Poſts by Gods Poſts*, Under pretences of *Decency*, and *Order*, 1 Cor. 14. But that in thoſe Things, that neceſſarily ariſe in every Action, and cannot be ſeparated from it, as Time; when no Divine Command hath Interpos'd; and ſo Place, Number of Perſons; Set, or occaſional performances of the Duty; If the Duty it ſelf be Commanded, and not the Circumſtances; Theſe ſo far, as Inſeparable from the Duty, neceſſarily attending the Duty, are warranted by the Duty it ſelf; which gives Freedom to that Natural *Decency*, and *Order*, the Apoſtle Commands, and yet ſhuts the Door on all Humane Additions under that Pretext: Seeing then the Duty of Frequent Holy Conference is an unqueſtionable, undeniable Ordinance of God, to ſecure the obſervation of it by prefixing Time, Place, Chriſtians Aſſociating for it; The *Orderly*, and *Decent* Admiſtration Eſtabliſh'd by ſuch, and ſuch Rules, ought not to be call'd into Queſtion, but are virtually contain'd, and are to be wiſely drawn

drawn out from the very Duty, and Ordinance it self; A great Instance of this I would give, *viz.* of the Circumstances being Comprized in the Duty it self is, 1 *Chron.* 17. 1. *David* by Divine Revelation understood; God would have, as a *Type* of the Glory of the Gospel *Church*, and of the *New-Jerusalem*, that stately Fabrick of the *Temple*, in the Place of the *Tabernacle*, and its *Curtains*; This He as a Prophet, and by Intimations of the Divine Spirit in some Foregoing Oracles, and Particularly to Himself knew; This substantial of the Divine Pleasure being known to Him, He argued to the most probable Appearance of Things, with Relation to the Conduct of so great a Work; That He so eminent a Prince, Rais'd up by God as a Type of Christ, *After his own Heart*, and that should *do All his Pleasure*, Was the Man, that should Build his House, and a Temple to Him; And tho it indeed was so, That He mis-apprehended in that very Particular; Yet because the substance of the Duty was according to the Divine Will, and that the Heart of *David* was upright, and that He design'd the Glory of God, and in his Love, and Fear; It was Graciously Accepted of Him in Christ.

And this comes Home to the Point, we are upon; That when the substantial Duty is of Divine Institution, The modelling of those Circumstances, that are not Determin'd by the appointment of God, and yet must be Determin'd, or the Duty cannot be perform'd, nor

nor the Institution observ'd without our Determination of them; And when this is done in Faith in the Blood of Christ, and by the Gracious Assistance of the Divine Spirit, and with Sincerity, and Uprightness of Heart; It is then, as truely an Ordinance of God, and the Attendance upon it is a Duty of his Worship, accepted in, and through Christ, As if the particular Circumstances had been each Defined by Him.

Nor can Things thus Regulated be Accounted among indifferent things; Because the Substance and Fundamentality of the Duty is of Divine Appointment; and because the very Circumstances in many, in most Cases of Divine Service have such a preference, and eligibleness by the very Impress Divine Wisdom hath set upon them, They are not meer Indifferents. And thus in Holy Conference, Seeing the main Duty is Commanded beyond all denial, And then seeing, those Actions, that have Time, and Place, and a certain Number of Persons Resolv'd to Negotiate them, are much more certainly Transacted, then what lie at the mercy of all Incertainties, so this Duty of Conference lying among many Hindrances, and Disadvantages, is upon Incertainty; But this fixation is in its own Nature, a means appointed by God for the ascertaining of it; And therefore it is beyond and above the Level of Indifferencies, as shall now be further Argued.

Those

Those that rank Fix'd Christian Conference among indifferent Actions, are misguided, (it being of a higher Classe than indifferent Actions) as having the Divine Stamp on it, (though not in expres Terms, yet often implied:) And I think the Natural, Genuine Sense, and Consequence of Scripture, is of equal force with Scripture; for there be many things commendably Practis'd in the Worship of God, that have no Verbal Precept to enforce them: to instance a few.

I know of no expres Command, for Ministers to Preach from a single Text of Scripture; or, for the Method generally us'd in Preaching:

For making Two Prayers, or one, or more, at every Sermon; for Preaching once a Day, or Twice; for Communicating once a Month, or more, or less: What Verbal Precept is there for Singing *David's Psalms* with Artificial Tunes?

With many like Circumstantials in use among the *Reformed*, that have no expres Precept to back them: But,

These, and such like Circumstances, of Time, Place and Method, are left to the Prudential Management of *Christians*, who ought therein to keep as close to the Sacred Oracles as possible. And this very way of Arguing, doth abundantly clear and countenance what I contend for, *viz. Stated Conference*. Nay, further, There's no Verbal Precept for changing the *Seventh-Day Sabbath*; with other warrantable Practices among

Sober

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Sober

Sober Christians: For such a Verbal Precept would soon silence the *Sabbatarians*, and satisfie others in Matters (that for want of an express Precept) remains so Controversal.

Now all that hath been said by Learned Men in those Controversies, hath been from Scripture Consequence and Example, which (as hath been hinted) is of equal force with Scripture: So that those Men, that reckon such Arguing sufficient to vindicate other Christian Duties, cannot deny the force of it here; for then they must contradict themselves; therefore by Parity there is the same Reason for *Stated Conference*, as for other Parts of Worship: And I need produce no other Arguments than what themselves insist on, *quid multa.*

But farther, to clear this Point, I shall insist on some Texts of Scripture, that notably hint at it, yea clearly imply it:

First, that known Text, *Mal.* 3. 16. *Then they that feared the Lord spake often one to another*, &c.

Which Text affords more Strength of Argument, when duly considered, than all Opponents can Answer: And though they should combine all their force, and squeeze their Brains for Notions, to invalidate so commendable a Practice as I contend for, yet can they never Evade the Force of this Text, which stands against them as a Bullwark unshaken.

Then they that feared the Lord, &c.

There seems to be an *Emphasis* put upon this Particle [*then*:] When was this [*then?*] 'Tis evident from the Preceding Discourse in that

that Chapter, when *Atheism, Prophanness, Contempt of God and Religion abounded*; [*then*] God's true Fearers were frequently found in this Practice: And pray, Is not our Age a parallel Juncture?

Doth not *Atheism, Deism, Quakerism, Socinianism, Arminianism*, &c. Superabound among us, with all manner of growing Prophanness and Impiety?

And is it not [*then*] the Duty of Gracious Souls to Convene together, as often as conveniency will permit, to stir up, and exhort each other, to adhere to the Cause and Truth of Christ, in so declining an Age, and to give each other a Lift Heaven-ward.

The Text says, *They spoke often one to another:* Which argues, It was not meerly occasional, or accidental, (as some would bear us in hand) but rather prefixt and appointed: For the Text seems to imply, That [*now*] they were oftner at this work than heretofore; which plainly denotes a Previous Design.

I know some Men would fain make this Scripture to intend no more than Preaching, and Meeting at the usual Solemn Assemblies: But,

This is a manifest offering of violence to the Text, by forcing it to Speak in their Dialect.

For the Speaking often one to another clearly implies a mutual Conferring; but there is no such Conferring in Preaching, or hearing

the Word Preach'd; for there only One ſpeaks, and All the reſt attend; therefore it cannot properly intend publick Preaching.

Beſides, the publick Aſſemblies are made up of Saints and Sinners, and therefore not ſo proper for a Work of this Nature; but the Text more tacitly implies, That thoſe who were thus Convened, were a Select Number of Holy Experienc'd Souls, full of Zeal for God's Glory, and Love to each other; being under the Sacred Influences of the ſame Spirit, Exciting and Stirring them up, to ſequeſter themſelves from the World, and from Sinners; that they might the more freely and mutually diſcourſe of Divine Matters, to each others Edification, and ſweet Satisfaction.

And though we have no explicate Account of what they ſaid, when thus met together, yet we may ſafely conclude, It was the things of God, things pertaining to His Kingdom, things that had a peculiar Tendency to advance His Glory, and their trueſt Good: For the Text (Speaking in our Dialect) ſaith, *That the Lord hearkened and heard; He took ſpecial notice of the Perſons, and of what they ſaid; and that which crowns all, he highly approves of them herein; and of this their Practice: Nay, further,* The bleſſed God ſeems to intimate, That theſe Perſons, and their Practice in this Matter, was ſo grateful and pleaſing to him, that He reſolves they ſhould be the firſt in his Thoughts and Eſteem. Who-

Whoever were forgotten, or neglected, these should be sure to be Remembered by him; for so the next Words imply, *v.* 16. And a Book of Remembrance was Written before him.

This Book of Remembrance is said to be before him, 'tis an allusion to the Practices of Men.

Who, when they intend any special favour for their Friends, keep their Case spread before them, that they may be still afresh in their Remembrance.

Sometimes, they will tye a string about their Finger, least multiplicity of Business, should divert their Thoughts, now our tender hearted Father, seems to speak in the same Language, *Esa.* 49. 16. Behold, *I have graven thee on the Palms of mine Hands, Thy Walls are continually before me*, &c.

Not, that the Infinite *Jehovah* needs any thing to Remember him, he may as soon forget himself, as his Children; But he is pleased to stoop to our Capacity, and to lisp to us in our own dialect, that he might hereby the better inform and assure us.

It was Written before Him, 'twas recorded in Heaven, and recorded in Scripture, and declar'd to all the World how well pleasing this Godly Practice was to him; And the sequel is, *Viz. (They shall be mine saith the Lord, in the Day when I make up my Jewels, and I will spare them, as a Man spareth his Son that serves him.)* Behold, he reckons them

among his Jewels, his Peculiar Treaſure, (tis Tranſporting to conſider how near, and how dear they are in his eſteem) This Scriptural Argument manifeſtly proves Chriſtian Conference, to be a Chriſtian Duty. But Secondly,

See again, *Heb.* 10. 24. Let us conſider one another to provoke unto Love and Good Works, not forſaking the aſſembly of our ſelves together, as the manner of ſome is, and ſo much the more as we ſee the day approaching; Probably, this Text mainly intends the publick Aſſemblies, (yet not Excluſive of others,) that have a like tendency, for 'tis allow'd in Orthodox Divinity; that Scripture may be taken in the largeſt Senſe, ſo long as it agrees with the Analogy of Faith, and therefore this Text is appliable to our preſent purpoſe.

For the conſidering (one another) to provoke to Love and Good Works, ſeems to denote a mutual care, of adviſing, and Exhorting each other, which falls under the Denomination of Chriſtian Conference.

Thirdly, the Royal *Pſalmiſt* tells us, he is a Companion for thoſe that fear God, *Pſal.* 119. *And Doubtleſs, he would meet his Beloved Companions as often as Poſſible.* So Pſalm. 119. *They that fear thee* (ſaith he) *will be glad, when they ſee me,* (And if ſo) *the oftner they meet, the better. For as Burning Coals put together, impart heat to each other, which occaſions a more Vehement Burning;* (*but*) *if long Separated,*

they

they grow Dull, and become Extinct (much like the Lukewarm Professors of this present Age.)

And truly I think, this is one reason (among many) of the declining State of many a Professor, (I mean) their not frequenting Christian Conference, for tho they hear a Sermon, or two, once a Week, they come away just as they went, (and perchance think all the rest as dull as themselves) whereas, if they frequented Christian Conference, they would see what blessed Progress some make, in choice Experiences, and Communion with God. And this would shame them out of their dosing Round, and provoke their diligence.

Fourthly, It might be urged, from *Luk.* 24. *When the two Disciples going to* Emaus, *were Communing of the things of Christs Kingdom*; Christ appears and Communes with them. And what if there had been more in Company? I hope, the greatness of the Number of Saints doth not hinder Christs Manifestations.

But (say our Opponents) this was an occasional Meeting, and Conferring, and not prefixt, nor designed. I Answer, this Objection is for want of better Arguments. For,

(Suppose it meerly accidental) yet no Man can infer from thence, that if it had been designed, they had miss'd of that mercy.

'Tis an Anti-Scriptural conclusion, (and a mad one) to imagine, that my designing to seek God shall frustrate my Expectation of finding him.

And

And therefore those Manifestations, that Holy Souls may meet with, in their more private occasional Discourses of Divine matters, (doth not prohibit but) rather Encourage their Discoursings of those matters more publickly.

Arg. 5. The main current of Holy Writ, runs this way, (*Viz.*) *Love one another, comfort one another, build up, exhort Councel, and Encourage one another.* I need not quote Scriptures to prove matter of Fact, since nothing is more evident: Now all those sacred Injunctions do not only enjoyn the thing, but also those means and methods, that have an aptitude and tendency to effect it; But Christian Conference hath a peculiar tendency, to effect such an End, therefore Christian Conference is a Duty.

Sixthly, I might argue from the practises of Private Christians; I confess, when I read the Lives and Living Examples of the Apostles, and first Christians, I can hardly forbear wishing, that I had liv'd in that Golden Age.

Oh, the Love to each other, the Burning Zeal, the shining purity, which in this Frozen Age I can see little of; We are hot upon nothing but a sorry World; Nay, come down farther, in after Centuries, and what more evident from Church History, then their frequent Conventions, their daily Exhorting and Building up one another, their Vigils (or Night Meetings) in season, out of season, not only

only on Lords Days, but other Days, as is well known to such, as are Conversant in Ecclesiastical History.

(And I cannot but hope) when there shall be large Effusions of the Spirit, pour'd out from on high, that our Wilderness shall yet be a Fruitful Field, and a new Face of things shall appear; Especially, in the Church of God (the Lord hasten it in his time.) Now Christian Conference is a kind of Preludium, to those expected Halcyon-Days, and may be said to forward them (at least so far forth) as proper means may conduce to such an End.

Seventhly, another Argument might be, from the Nature of Christian Conference. For,

'Tis a mutual conferring about the things of God, things of the greatest moment, things of Eternal Consequence, the subject matter of which generally is, *Viz.* How may I Glorifie God in my Generation? Or, how may I know my self to be Spiritually alive? How may I distinguish between common grace, and saving grace? Or, when may I be said to Act Faith? Or, how shall I discern between raging Corruption, and Reigning? Or, what are the most proper means, to mortify a special Sin?

With many other Questions of like import, which are frequently Discours'd of in Conferences.

And

And is not every Gracious Soul Solicitous in those matters? Do They not eminently concern him? ('Tis true,) there are many good Books that resolve these, and such like Questions. But every one hath not Money to buy those Books, nor time to read them, *&c.*

What, tho every individual Saint, be no Casuist, nor a compleat Judge (amply) to solve such Questions, yet is he Judge of his own Experience, which oftimes is of great use to others, altho his Knowledge be but scanty. But,

Tho some private Christians are not capacitated to speak much to Edification, (yet it doth not follow, that none are capable) for God hath given some large Talents to be imploy'd this way.

So those that have but a small Stock of Knowledge, may improve by the help of him that hath more, for the Wise God *hath given nothing in Vain.*

Now Christian Conference (in the very Nature of the thing) is an apt means, Conducing both to Knowledge and Experience. Therefore it is a Christian Duty.

Eighthly: In Godly Conference, there is room for Godly Persons, to Communicate Experiences to each other, this is undeniably an incumbent Duty.

For God doth not vouchsafe those precious Experiences to any (meerly) for private use, but that I might comfort others, with the same com-

Comforts wherewith I my self am Comforted, 2 *Cor.* 1.

Holy *David* disclaims hiding God's loving Kindness in his Heart, and therefore calls the Saints about him to declare, *What God had done for his Soul*, Psal. 66.

The beloved Disciple begins his Epistle, 1 *Joh.* 1. 3. *That which we have seen and heard* (saith he) *that declare we unto you, that you also might have fellowship with us*, &c.

'Tis the Duty of God's Children to talk of his Salvation from Day to Day, and to make mention of His Works with Rejoycing, *Psal.* 105. and 107. with multitudes of other places.

And indeed, this is one end of our Conversion, *That we should be to the praise of His Grace*, Eph. 1. 12. My Experience is fed, that I might feed others: So Christ to *Peter*, *Luk.* 22. *When thou art converted*, [recovered from thy Fall, and healed,] *then strengthen thy brethren.*

The Lips of the Righteous feed many, saith *Solomon*: So *Matth.* 13. 52. Every Scribe well instructed unto the Kingdom of Heaven, is like a Good Housholder, that brings out of his Treasures things New and Old.

And this holds good, not only of Ministers, but of every individual Christian: For every one must give an account of himself, and Talents unto God.

A *Heathen* could say; *We lay in, and lay up, that we may lay out, for the good of many.* Now Spiritual Experience is an invaluable Talent, and

ought to be Improved; But concealing it, is no Improving it:

I ought to declare to others, how Gracious God hath dealt with me, as before;

And in so doing, I induce them to bless God on my account, and encourage them to Confide in his Goodness. *Many shall see it, and be glad,* saith the *Psalmist, and shall trust in the Lord.*

But to be Silent, robs Him of His Glory, and more tacitly denies His Favour; And at once, gives His Word and Works the Lie.

I confess, I have sometimes admir'd, That Gospel-Ministers do not intermix their Discourses more with their own Experiences, it being oft-times of excellent use. By Gospel-Ministers, I mean not Any, but those who fear God; For, should I call others Gospel-Ministers, I should scandalize them, by calling them what they would not be call'd.

I find too many Preach up the *Arminian Points, Free-Will, Moral Suasion, Falling from Grace, Conditional Election*; with a deal of the like *Heteorodox* Stuff, being the Spawn of *Pelagius, Arminius, Socinus*, and their Erroneous Followers. But what's the Chaff to the Wheat, saith the Lord? 'Tis vainly expected, that these Men should Preach their Experiences, because they have none; or if any, 'tis doubtless much like their Doctrine. But by Gospel-Ministers, I mean such holy Men as truly understand the nature of the Gospel, and of the New Covenant,

call

Call them what you will; yea, of what Party or Persuasion so ever, if Orthodox in Judgment, and Holy in Conversation, that Preach up a Crucified Christ, and Free Grace in him, as the Foundation of all Obedience; These I call Gospel-Ministers. Now I wonder that these Men tell us no more of their own Experience: For,

'Tis a common Observation, That those Discourses, that Savour most of inward Experience, are more Influential and Warming, Than Those that are more Scholastick, wanting that Experience; For what comes from the Heart, reaches it.

And it is further granted by Ministers, and others, that some private Christians have a richer Stock of Experiences, then Ministers generally have: For oft-times a private *Christian* hath the Thing treated of, whilst the other hath it only in *Theory*. Now *Christian Conference* is a proper Season for such as are stored with Experiences, to communicate them to their *Fellow-Christians*. And therefore such Conference is the more a Duty.

Ninth Argument for *Stated Conference* may be taken, from the usual Practices of Men in Civil Affairs; they have their Stated Meetings, and Prefix'd Cabals, to concert Measures about Terrene Things; they have their Successive Clubs, to ingratiate themselves into each others Acquaintance, in order to promote Trade and Commerce, and to gain more Light and Experience in their respective Imployments: And, *Why must the Children of this World be still wiser*

than the Children of Light? Or, Why may not gracious Men take the most proper Methods, with respect to the other World, that Carnal Men do, with respect unto this World?

We see Merchants, and others of the same Countrey, when Negotiating in Foreign Parts, covet to meet their indeared Country-men, who speak in the same Dialect with themselves, that they may have a little Discourse of their Native Country.

And shall not Heaven-born Souls, who Trafick in Heavenly Things, covet as much to meet their Fellow-Travellers, to have a little Discourse of their heavenly Country, and talk one with another in the Language of *Canaan*.

I think it carries the Force of an Argument, when duly applied.

10. Another *Argument* is, The various Gifts and Qualifications that Infinite Wisdom hath seen good, to bestow on some private Christians; Those noble Talents must not be hid in a Napkin, but us'd and improv'd in that way and thing, unto which they naturally tend. And to this effect doth *Edmond Allen*. the Martyr, express himself to the *Popish Bishops*, who accused him for Instructing the People; (he being no Priest, but a Miller;) But the blessed Martyr boldly vindicates his Practice of Instructing the Ignorant: *For*, saith he, *I have both the Command and Example of my Lord and Master, to do all the Good I can, in my Generation. For* (saith he, in his Vindication) *what availeth it for me to have Talents, if I must not use them? What availeth*

vaileth it for me to have Food, but must eat none: or Apparel, but must wear none? What signifies it to be a good Lawyer, and utter no Law; or to be a Physician, and practice on none?

What, saith he, *shall every Artifier be commended for practising his Art, and shall the Christian be prohibited and discommended?*

Shall Ignorance be condemn'd in all Sciences, and yet Countenanced in Christians? The Story is worth Perusal. See *Acts and Monum.* 2 Vol. p. 794.

I could instance several others from *Martyrologies*, to the same effect, whose Examples would prove more, than we need in this Matter, as might easily be evinced. And,

Surely, those Precious Martyrs were no *Enthusiasts*, nor led by a blind Zeal, that were so forward in Practices of this Nature, that it cost many of them their Lives, as is evident from Church History; Now (if any Minister of the Gospel) or Private Christian, be positively against this way of Conference, which I contend for, methinks such a one might do well, to shew Cause for so manifest a dissonary, from the Practice of such Holy Souls before mentioned; And the concurring Consent of so many Orthodox Divines, who highly approve of this Duty.

Such a Minister, in all his Studies, never yet found a Prohibition in Sacred Writ, to deter from this Practice of *Christian Conference*; and therefore his dislike, is but a poor Argument for my neglect of so known a Duty.

The

The Parable of the Talents is so far from prohibiting, that it strictly Enjoyns the using and improving of all our Talents, to our utmost Capacity, *Matth.* 25. 30. An Instance methinks, should make Men afraid of being unprofitable themselves, or of rendring others so, by hiding their Talent in a Napkin. And I doubt the prohibition of a Minister will prove but a lame Excuse, for the *Non*-imployment of my Talents, when I come to give an Account for them, unto Him who is the Donour. But trust to it who will, I will not; especially since I am to follow *Paul*, no further than he follows Christ, 1 *Cor.* 11. 1. I could never yet find the Apostle blaming his Hearers for getting Knowledge, or prohibit them from using it, when got; For then, in a Sense, they had as good have been without it.

But he blames them for their *non*-proficiency in both, *Heb.* 5. 12. *Ye have had time enough*, saith he, *to have been Teachers of others.* Hence, it seems, *Paul* here allows what I contend for, if not more: And therefore, those that would forbid private Christians to use their Talents to Edification, seem to savour of another Spirit, than was found in this great Apostle: For *Paul* every-where presses, not only *Ministers*, but the whole Body of *Christians*, to covet earnestly the best things, and chiefly those Gifts and Qualifications which shall render them the more useful to the Church, and Edifying to one another; which is plain from 1 *Cor.* 14. throughout, and many other places.

Now

Now to what end should *Christians* so earnestly covet these things, if they must not use them; or, if they must only use them accidentally, and not otherwise, surely this is no Scripture-Conclusion.

But say our Opponents; *Yes, you may use them in your Families.*

I *Answer.* But what if I have no Family: Or, if I may use them there, why not elsewhere? if I may Edifie a few, why not many? Is not a greater Good preferable to a lesser? Where doth the Scripture prohibit me but to my Family, or to a lesser Number? And if the Scripture do not; What solid Grounds hath any Man for such a Prohibition?

This is unlike Self-denying *Moses*, *Numb.* 11. 29. *Would to God all the Lord's servants were prophets; and that He would put His Spirit upon them.* But if any *Minister*, or other, will pretend to affirm, That *Christian Conferences*, or something of like Nature, in which *private Christians* may and ought to use and impart their Gift for Edification more publickly, than in their private Families: I say, whoever asserts, That such a publick way of Exercising a *Christian's* Gifts is not warranted from Scripture, I would send him to that, 1 *Cor.* chap. 14. especially *verse* 12. and *verse* 31. and deny him to give me any tolerable Sense of that, and of many such-like Scriptures, if such a Duty as I contend for, be excluded.

See again, 1 *Pet.* 4. 10. *As every Man hath received the gift, even so minister the same one to another*

nother, *as good Stewards of the manifold Grace of God.*

From this Text 'tis evident, That every true *Chriſtian* hath received ſome Gift, Qualification, or Ability, which may be of uſe to others; and ſo the Gifts of others may be of uſe to him; and therefore the Apoſtle Exhorts every Man that hath received ſuch Gifts, to exerciſe them in Miniſtring, or Communicating of them to each other; intimating, that this was one great end for which they were beſtowed; and I know of no fitter Seaſon in which a *Chriſtian* may exerciſe his Gifts to better Advantage, than in *Stated Chriſtian Conference:* And whatever undue Reflections ſome Perſons may caſt upon this Chriſtian Practice, through Ignorance, Prejudice, or Self-Intereſt, yet the Apoſtle makes it a Character of a good Steward of the manifold Grace of God, as above; and therefore I think, thoſe Men that forbid this Practice, do manifeſtly contradict the Senſe of the Apoſtle in this Scripture. See *Pool's Annot.* on the place.

Eleventh Argument for ſuch *Conference* might be; Becauſe it hath an eminent Tendency to diſpel and ſcatter the Fogs and Miſts of Ignorance that are found, not only among carnal People, but alſo among Perſons really Gracious.

I have known too many Standing Profeſſors, and Communicants, that know not the difference between *Juſtification* and *Sanctification*; between the *Covenant of Grace* (they ſo often hear of) and that of *Works*; Now this is a great ſhame, and blame-worthy among *Chriſtians*; and

and I have known too many such People, who for want of an Orthodox Judgment, have turn'd aside to *Quakerism*, and other hurtful Errors.

I have been exercis'd with variety of dreadful Temptations, and deep Desertions of Soul, and was led, for many a Day, through the waste howling *Wilderness*.

And since Free Grace did pluck me out of that Pit of Noise and Confusion, as *David* calls it, *Psal.* 40. 2. I have much coveted to be Conversant with doubting, troubled Souls; and I have often found, that a great deal of their Trouble, and dismal Conclusions, have proceeded from Error in Judgment: Poor mistaken Creatures are apt to conclude, That they can Repent, and humble themselves into God's Covenant, and by Parity Sin themselves out again, both of which are False and Dangerous. Now this proceeds from their ignorance of the true Nature of the Gospel, and Covenant of Grace. And though I am far from Judging such persons, as to their state, (for I have known many such to have the root of the matter in them.)

Neither can I say, how much Ignorance may consist with True Grace: But yet such Ignorance is very mischievous; for it robs God of Glory, and the Soul of Comfort; and oftimes makes a poor Soul stand doubting, and trembling all his days, though on a sure Foundation.

And therefore I plead for Christian Conference, Because it hath a tendency to extricate such perplexed Creatures out of those Labyrinths, by removing the Scales from their Eyes.

And whereas some would prohibit Women from such Conferences, which (to me) is very unreasonable; For,

Have they not Souls as well as Men? Have they not Doubts and Fears, yea, generally more (because of their Weakness)? And though they are prohibited from speaking, yet I hope they may learn something from what is spoken.

Surely, if it be a Duty in Men, 'tis consequently, as much a Duty in Women.

They that feared the Lord, spake often one to another, Mal. 3. He doth not say, there were no Women amongthem.

We find the Holy Women, among the Apostles, and Primitive Christians, in their daily Conventions; See *Acts* 1. 14. So that to prohibit Women from such Meetings, is entirely *Non*-scriptural.

A 12*th* Argument might be argued from the *Real Benefit, and Sensible Advantage that doth accrue to gracious Souls in this Duty.*

And here I could bring multitudes to attest the Truth of what I say, who are ready to set their *probatum est* on it.

That have repeated and continued Experience of Gods owning them, warning their chill Souls, Confirming their Feeble hopes, strengthning their weak Graces (and sometimes) in a very great measure and degree; which undeniably argues, that God highly approves of this Practice (for otherwise) he would not thus approve of them herein, &c.

And

And this single Argument hath more solid Reason in it, then all Opponents can Answer. Yea further, if Christians are under desertion, Clouds, or Temptations, of what sort or size soever, in Confering among Experienced Christians, they often meet with relief.

For herein one Soul is made Instrumental, of resolving the doubts of another.

Hereby I come to see, that others have the same inward trouble and exercise with my self; Hereby I discern, that the Holy Spirit Works the same way in my Heart, as it doth in other Christians; And this gives great light into my State, and is of Exellent use.

Hereby Satans subtile malice is often baffl'd, for I see others have the same Temptations, Corruptions, Afflictions, and Burdens, which I groan under as insupportable, &c.

Before 'twas Satans Interest to perswade me, that my condition was unparrallel'd, and therefore desparate. But, when the Snare is discovered, 'tis half broken.

For which Reason (I doubt not) but Satan is a great Enemy to Christian Conference, and would suffer none (could he prevent it.) And I think it well worth their while, who decry this practice (duely to consider) whose cause they do Espouse——

I think it needless, to produce any more Arguments, tho much more might be added to the same Effect; And every sensible Reader may see, that every Argument, is capable of Improvement.

But from what hath been hinted, I think nothing more apparent then my firſt aſſertion, (*Viz.*)

(That Chriſtian Conference, is a Chriſtian Duty:)

(*The Objections.*)

As for the Objections againſt this Chriſtian Practice (I confeſs, I never met with any of weight) and indeed, the Nature of the thing is ſuch, as will admit of no material Objection, that chiefly inſiſted on is this, (*Viz.*)

Thoſe Conferences (ſay ſome) have this Evil tendency, that it puffs Men up with Pride, and Oſtentation, Men come to ſhew their parts, and to be admired, with many other Siniſter Ends, they have in Exerciſing their Gifts, and therefore they had much better let it alone, *&c.* ——

Unto which I Anſwer.

This Objection carries a ſpecious pretence, of great Humility and ſelf-denial. But,

I would firſt ask this Objector, how he can prove this diſmal charge.

Is it from his own Experience and ſo meaſuring all Men by himſelf? (But this is no good Proof) for tho I may not have attained to ſuch a degree of Mortification, yet it doth not follow that none elſe have attain'd it?

And beſides, Spiritual Pride is a Heart Sin, (and conſider'd as ſuch) 'tis open to none, but the ſearcher of Hearts. And therefore,

Such a Peremptory concluſion is a palpable Breach of Chriſtian Charity, 1 *Cor.* 13.

True

True Christian Love teaches me to hope, and believe, and judge the best of my fellow Christians, and of all their Actions, (especially) such as seem to be levell'd at Gods Glory.

The humble Man is much at home, and esteems another better then himself, and puts the most favourable construction on the practices of others.—

But further, Spiritual Pride (as one well observes) is of so subtile a Nature, that if it can find no other Foundation, 'twill build on humility it self; so that a Man shall be Proud of his very Humility; And if so then the Objector is equally Obnoxious to the same Evil. For,

He may be as Proud of his pretended Humility, in keeping away from a Conference (under such a pretence) as he that frequents them.

But again, we all know, (or ought to know) that 'tis no Sin to be tempted to the vilest impiety, (no further) then we comply with the Temptation, *Christ was tempted to self-murther, and to Worship the Devil*, Mat. 4. &c.

But alas! we cannot say as he did, *(the Prince of this World cometh, but finds nothing in me)*; When Satan tempts a poor Believer to Pride, or any thing of like Nature, he finds a Vicious Principle in him, much of the same Nature with his Temptation; which he labours to blow up to a compliance with his Suggestion; And Temptation hath an Aptitude to draw forth Corruption; but yet I am no further culpable, than I comply. *The Flesh lusteth against the Spirit*, saith

saith *Paul*, *Gal.* 5. *and the Spirit against the Flesh*; so that ye cannot do the things that ye would do, *&c.*

Blessed be God for this contrary Principle, that opposeth the Interest of the Flesh and the Devil: For though I cannot be as good as I would be, yet I am not so bad as Sin and Satan would fain make me: And therefore,

When in this, or any other Duty, Satan watching for a fit Season, to blow up Pride in me, and labours to mix his Temptation with my Corruption, yet this shall not hurt me, if I oppose it, resist it, loath it, cry to Heaven against it, desiring nothing more than a riddance of it; and if so, God will never charge this Sin upon me; and if he acquit me, I disregard all other Accusations. That Sin shall never be charg'd on thee, saith Mr. *Baxter*, which thou hatest more than lovest, and which thou wouldst rather part with than keep.

But Secondly, Satan being a Spirit, hath nearer access to our Spirits than we are aware of, and by permission from above, he doth often impose upon us the greatest Falshoods imaginable, especially if the Constitution be *Melancholy*, or *Disorder'd*; And doubtless, in this case, as well as others, he oft-times transforms himself into an *Angel of Light*, and under this disguise beguileth unwary Souls to a neglect of their Duty, under the colour of *Humility*; or, if he can't keep them from their Duty by any other Stratagem, he can with Facility impose on them,

them, that they are proud of what they do, and therefore they had better let it alone, and so avoid the occasion.

(And I doubt not) but he often prepossesses, a Soul with prejudice against others, and makes him believe, that they also have Sinister Ends in what they do; (And by this means) he prevents my being profitable to them, or them to me.—

So that whilst my dear Christian Friend, is labouring to Edify me, by his Pious Counsel, such a prejudice (in me) shall render his Endeavours wholly abbortive, *&c.*

Such silly stuff the Father of Lies, like a sneaking Sophister, labours to impose on poor Souls, to amaze and bewilder them, chiefly to prevent their doing Good in their Place and Generation. But,

We are not Ignorant of his Devices, 2 Cor. 2. 11.

I confess, I have sometimes admir'd, that the Apostle, who so frequently Exhorts *Christians* to imploy their Gifts to Edification, as 1 *Cor.* 12. 1 *Pet.* 4. 10. 1 *Cor.* 14. *&c.* is so sparing of this Caution, *viz.* To take heed of Spiritual Pride in the use of them.

I find no such Caution in expres Terms, tho it be sometimes implied:

(Not but the caution is grave and useful) but I say, the Apostle seems very sparing in it, when he so often presses Christians to use their gifts, for in the place above cited, 1 *Cor.* 14. There's a whole Chapter spent (chiefly on this subject) directing and perswading believers to imploy

imploy their Gifts to Edifying (without any ſuch cautionary Inſtruction.)

The Reaſon (ſome think) is chiefly this, becauſe in thoſe firſt Ages of the Church, there were ſuch plentiful Effuſions of the bleſſed Spirit.

Such ſtrong Love to Chriſt, and to each other, ſuch ſenſible aſſurance, and ſweet Communion with God, ſuch a Burning Zeal for Gods Glory, and the good of Souls, that there was little room for Pride to exert it ſelf (and therefore) the leſs need of ſuch a caution.

'Tis true, this worſt of Weeds will grow in the beſt of Soils; and 'tis as true, that where it abounds, 'tis chiefly for want of ſo flouriſhing and heavenly a Frame of Soul, as aboveſaid: And no wonder if it abound in our Frozen Age, wherein Communion with God is a Paradox; neither is there that ſweet Intimacy and Familiarity among true Believers, as in thoſe Primitive times; They were better Acquainted in half an Hour (as One ſays) than we in half a Year:

And this ſtrangeneſs among Chriſtians is an Effect of Pride, and the way to cure it is a Heavenly Intimacy, which is every where commanded, and commended; Now Chriſtian Conference hath this Happy tendency, it bring Chriſtians better acquainted, it lets them into each others Affections; And this doth not foment Pride (but deſtroy it.)

For, is a Man proud of Teaching his dear Child, or proud of Inſtructing his Family? or proud of Adviſing his Beloved Friends; I think it

it Non-ſenſe, for 'tis granted (on all hands) that Oſtentation is moſt apt to exert its ſelf among ſtrangers, eſpecially if the Company be great, either in Number or Quality; but truly there's little danger of this in *Chriſtian Conferences*, where, both Number and Quality are wanting.

But, however, could Believers attain to ſo happy a Frame of following God, as dear Children, would they preſs hard after the neareſt and cloſeſt Communion with God, and love one another with a pure Heart fervently, as the Apoſtle ſpeaks, they would ſoon find all Pride to wither away, like *Jonah*'s Gourd, as not being able to grow, under the Sacred Beams of the *Sun of Righteouſneſs*, they would find their whole Soul ſo taken up, with the Senſe of Divine Favour, that they would feel themſelves under a holy Neceſſity of being, and doing the whole Will of God; For, 2 *Cor.* 5. *The love of Chriſt conſtrains us.* But this being no direct Anſwer to the *Objection* above; and therefore, Secondly, to come cloſe to the Matter, I ask any Opponent, *Whether Chriſtian Conference be a Duty, or not?*

If he thinks not, let him produce his Arguments; or, if he grant it, then all Objections vaniſh into Smoak: For, Duty is Duty, not to be Diſputed, but Practiſed. Surely I am not to neglect my Duty, upon the Account of ſome Inconveniencies that accidentally may occur, in the diſcharge of that Duty.

employ their Gifts to Edifying (without any such cautionary Instruction.)

The Reason (some think) is chiefly this, because in those first Ages of the Church, there were such plentiful Effusions of the blessed Spirit.

Such strong Love to Christ, and to each other, such sensible assurance, and sweet Communion with God, such a Burning Zeal for Gods Glory, and the good of Souls, that there was little room for Pride to exert it self (and therefore) the less need of such a caution.

'Tis true, this worst of Weeds will grow in the best of Soils; and 'tis as true, that where it abounds, 'tis chiefly for want of so flourishing and heavenly a Frame of Soul, as abovesaid: And no wonder if it abound in our Frozen Age, wherein Communion with God is a Paradox; neither is there that sweet Intimacy and Familiarity among true Believers, as in those Primitive times; They were better Acquainted in half an Hour (as One says) than we in half a Year:

And this strangeness among Christians is an Effect of Pride, and the way to cure it is a Heavenly Intimacy, which is every where commanded, and commended; Now Christian Conference hath this Happy tendency, it bring Christians better acquainted, it lets them into each others Affections; And this doth not foment Pride (but destroy it.)

For, is a Man proud of Teaching his dear Child, or proud of Instructing his Family? or proud of Advising his Beloved Friends; I think it

it Non-ſenſe, for 'tis granted (on all hands) that Oſtentation is moſt apt to exert its ſelf among ſtrangers, eſpecially if the Company be great, either in Number or Quality; but truly there's little danger of this in *Chriſtian Conferences*, where, both Number and Quality are wanting.

But, however, could Believers attain to ſo happy a Frame of following God, as dear Children, would they preſs hard after the neareſt and cloſeſt Communion with God, and love one another with a pure Heart fervently, as the Apoſtle ſpeaks, they would ſoon find all Pride to wither away, like *Jonah*'s Gourd, as not being able to grow, under the Sacred Beams of the *Sun of Righteouſneſs*, they would find their whole Soul ſo taken up, with the Senſe of Divine Favour, that they would feel themſelves under a holy Neceſſity of being, and doing the whole Will of God; For, 2 *Cor.* 5. *The love of Chriſt conſtrains us.* But this being no direct Anſwer to the *Objection* above; and therefore, Secondly, to come cloſe to the Matter, I ask any Opponent, *Whether Chriſtian Conference be a Duty, or not?*

If he thinks not, let him produce his Arguments; or, if he grant it, then all Objections vaniſh into Smoak: For, Duty is Duty, not to be Diſputed, but Practiſed. Surely I am not to neglect my Duty, upon the Account of ſome Inconveniencies that accidentally may occur, in the diſcharge of that Duty.

But, *Christian Conference* is a Duty, as hath been Evinced, and therefore not to be neglected, for fear of acting Pride in the discharge of it; for He that hath enjoyn'd it, hath also promis'd Assistance in the discharge of it; otherwise, a well Accomplish'd Minister may on the same grounds quit that honourable Post, for he hath the same Corruption, and is liable to the same Temptation: But,

Of all those that have deserted the Ministry, I never could hear them alledge this, as a Reason for their discontinuance; or, if they had, 'tis a very lame Reason.

Why, I may as well say, I will not Pray, lest I should have vain Thoughts in Prayer: or, I'll not Receive, because some do it unworthily: or, I'll not read the Scriptures, because I am liable to mistakes: or, I'll hide my Talent in a Napkin, for fear of Pride in the use of it: or, I'll put my Candle under a Bushel, lest my Neighbour should see his way by it, and so thank me. And these (for Substance) are of the same nature, with those Arguments that are brought against *Conferences*: But,

Such Arguments are Ridiculous, and deserve no other Answer, but Contempt.

Second Objection.

Some further Object: *Men*, say they, *at Conferences, take upon them to Interpret Scriptures, which is not their Business, but the Work of Ministers.*

Answer.

Answer. This Objection savours of great Ignorance; one would think the Person that Forms this Objection, was one of *Bellarmine's* Pupils, *Vasquez*, *Cajetan*, or some other of the *Popish* Doctors: For this Objection was originally form'd in their Forge; but I dare say, he that starts this Objection, is no Interpreter of Scripture; or if he be, I can shew him better Annotations on this Head; it will greatly puzzle and perplex him, to prove that none may Open or Interpret Scriptures, but only Ministers. I think nothing more obvious than this, That it's every *Christian's Duty* to labour after a full Knowledge of the Scriptures; but that he can never have, if he must not, in a Sense, Interpret them:

And how shall I know whether Ministers Interpretation be right, or no? but by comparing it with Scripture, *Acts* 17. 11. *Isa.* 8. 20. And what signifies my comparing it, if I do not understand it? And how can I understand it, if I must not Interpret it?

Indeed, if any did Reject the help of Ministers, the Objection had some Sense and Weight in it; but I know no such, therefore the Objection is not only frivilous, but very faulty.

'Tis truly said of the Scriptures, *That a Lamb may wade in it, and an Elephant swim.* For some obscure Texts, being profoundly Mysterious, do puzzle the most Learned Criticks: And we see the ablest Expositors greatly differ in their Conceptions about them: But the main Current of Scripture lies on the level with mean Capacities.

Now *Chriſtian Conference* being chiefly deſign'd for Practical Godlineſs, is not ſo Converſant with that part of Scripture, which is ſo obſcure and doubtful, but with that part which is more eaſily underſtood.

But again, Why may not private *Chriſtians* Interpret Scripture, at leaſt ſo far forth as their Duty and Intereſt is concerned: For, have we not the Aſſiſtance of Miniſters? Have we not variety of Annotations, Expoſitions, Learned Commentaries, and ſucceſſive Preaching? And what's all this for? but that we rightly underſtand, and apply the Scripture. And, what muſt the Scripture, (notwithſtanding all this,) ſtill be as a Sealed Book? where will thoſe dark Concluſions terminate? But,

Again, hath not every True Believer the Promiſe of the Holy Spirit, to lead him into all Truth, *John* 14. And doth not this bleſſed Spirit open the Underſtanding? Is it not an Unction from the Holy One, 1 *John* 2. 20? Is it not a Light ſet up in the Soul, illuminating and teaching the Soul to diſcern the Mind of God in Scripture? Nay, further, is not the Scripiture, in many Points, its own Interpreter, and therefore the beſt; (Light is ſelf-evidencing?)

But again, private *Chriſtians* Interpreting the Scripture, is not in oppoſition to Miniſters, neither doth it invalidate their Learned Labours; but 'tis in ſubſervient Concurrency with them, and renders their work the more ſucceſsful.

What though ſome private Chriſtians are dull, and unintelligible, yet it doth not follow, that all

all are so; for we find some private Christians of very capacious Intellects, piercing Judgments, quick Inventions, strong Memories, with other Natural Endowments, far beyond some Ministers, as is abundantly evident.

Now, when God hath been pleased to Sanctifie all these natural Endowments, and added supernatural Gifts; when the stream of their most intense Thoughts and Genius, is turn'd into the Scripture-Channel; Why may not such a Person be able to Open and Apply the Scripture? And if able, shew me that Text that prohibits him; but if there be no such Text, all Unscriptural Prohibitions herein are invalid: I find the Majority of Objectors against this Practice are very ignorant People, that can neither give a Reason, nor receive it when given: For,

Why may not my Soul be profited by a Lay-Man, as well as by a Clergy-Man?

May not an Earthen Pot contain a precious Ointment? May not a leaden Pipe convey living Water? Or, why may not a poor Shepherd direct me as right in the way, as the Sheriff of the County? (Nay, perchance better,) as knowing it better: Doth the Beloved tear the Letter sent from her Lover, because a Porter brought it? Or, is the Message rejected, because sent by an inferiour Hand? The Application is easie.

Doth the sick Man refuse the proper Medicine, because the Doctor did not bring it himself?

And

And, to Conclude, why may I not teach my Friend, what I have learned of another? Doth not every little Artificer the same? And why not the Christian? But I shall desist, though somewhat abruptly. There are a few other Objections, but so trivial, that I think them not worth mentioning, much less Answering: Nevertheless, whatever Objection may be raised by any Opponent, I think it may receive a Plenary Answer from the precedent Discourse. Many other Reasons might be produced; but *quid multa*; for, I have herein studied Conciseness and Brevity: And when I see these few Arguments well Answered, I promise a Rejoynder; *Sed non ante.*

F I N I S.

E R R A T A.

The Reader is desired to Correct with his Pen the following Mistakes.

Page 8, line 23. *for on*, read *against*, p. 8. l. 24. for *pretext*, r. *pretence*, p. 18. l. 18. for *private*, r. *primitive*, p. 22. l. 19. for *would not be called*, r. *indeed are not*, p. 23. l. 20. for *follow*, r. *fellow*, p. 30, l. 26. for *warning*, r. *warming*.

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London, Feb. 13. $169\frac{8}{9}$.

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